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WITH GERMAN PRISONERS IN FRANCE

By BARTON BLAKE.

Paris, Aug. 30.—One approaches a German prison camp in France with a feeling that very possibly one's sympathies may be appealed to by the plight of prisoners of war. One's sympathies emerge from a visit to one prison camp, at least, that at Lyons, with never a scratch. These sturdy, well-tanned privates, peasants or mechanics from half a dozen German kingdoms, are neither abused, overworked nor underfed. They are such pictures of health that the likeliest fear of the pro-Ally American is that they are being treated a shade too well.

Not in France, at any rate, have funds and food sent to prisoners of war from their homes been diverted to other beneficiaries. For these prisoners the hours of work are long enough certainly—eleven hours daily—but there are so many intervals of rest in this task of excavating for Lyons's new municipal hospital that the job is not a hard one for any healthy worker. At other than working hours they are free to make use of a well stocked canting—with all the signs printed in both languages, French and German. Many of the prisoners have seized the opportunity of their peaceful stay in France to improve their knowledge of French grammar and conversation. For a month, the authorities told me, there had been no hospital cases or sickness among the prisoners at Lyons. At present there are only 150 of them working there, the rest having been lent to help farmers with their harvests. Farming is, perhaps, the best job a prisoner of war can hope for; it almost certainly insures health, fair treatment and good home cooking—for these farm workers from beyond the Rhine sit at table with the master himself and the master's household, and have as much to eat as their outdoor appetites demand; very much more, that is, than any one except the Hohenzollern and his friends the millionaires is having to eat in Germany to-day. Usage varies from farm to farm, but very generally when the laborers come in from the field at 11 o'clock in the morning it is their rule to wash and shave for dinner, served at 11:30. Not till 1 do they return to the fields—or so it is in the Beauce country. Sunday morning is a time marked for psalm singing. It would be too much to say that these choruses are regarded with much favor by the countryside; the French countryside is not given to lugubrious chants. But the thing is tolerated. All the more so as Sunday afternoon the prisoner-farmers play quietly at cards.

To return to Lyons, the prisoners I saw there include some of the handsomest men I have ever seen—bronzed giants with noble beards; also specimens of Prussian degradation that would make the average French cartoon of the Crown Prince seem a flattering piece of the ideal. One was not free to talk with these men, I regret to say, but, intellectually speaking, the opportunity missed was hardly a great one. Sullen curiosity was the expression which their faces took on as I passed them with the chief contractor and the camp adjutant, and their resemblance to healthy but sulky children, spoiled by a good mother, was almost humorous.

The hospital enterprise upon which these men are working will provide some one with work for about eight years. It was undertaken soon after the outbreak of the war primarily to occupy the workers temporarily thrown out of employment by the war—although the need of a larger municipal hospital was real enough. There are to be 1,200 beds and something like twenty-seven separate buildings, all connected by underground passages. The underground part of the construction has already been pretty much completed, and permits one to see the ground plan at least of what will ultimately prove a model among hospitals. It no doubt interests some of the Germans working on the Lyons hospital to know that it is to be named after the nurse Edith Cavell. The great size and ambitious construction of the *Hôpital Cavell* need surprise no visitor to Lyons, for the University of Lyons has since its origin been strongest in its department of chemistry and in its school of medicine. Lyons has supplied some of France's greatest physicians, even as it has given the world great painters and architects. As for the labor of the German prisoners, it has thus far been confined to excavation and to masonry, in both of which tasks they have the coöperation of Catalan and Italian laborers, who seem to work with the Teuton wholly without friction. Incidentally, Germans are no novelty to Lyons. The industry of the town was honeycombed by Germans up to the very commencement of the war.

It cannot be a joy to be a prisoner even under the best of circumstances, but if I were going to be a prisoner at all I think I should prefer to be at Lyons, for there at least one is assured of not too uncomfortable a bunk, a cotton mattress, blankets, plenty to eat, and an equipment of shower baths in a bathhouse so well provided that in cold weather the prisoners can have the water as hot as they want it.

It was just before the dinner hour that I visited this camp, and I was taken to the kitchen, where, as the adjutant and I appeared on the threshold, two cooks in the prison uniform clicked their heels to attention in that style instinct with efficient servility which somehow one never sees in the French soldier. The dinner which those cooks were providing smelled good, and part of it at least, I can affirm, tasted good, too. The stew was not scamped in regard to either meat or vegetables, the war bread (for French soldiers and German prisoners in France do not receive wheat bread) was sweet. Before going out in the morning the German prisoner is given his coffee and black bread, and almost always there is added to this the big spoonful of jam or the bit of fruit which is not provided for in the regulations, but which the good-natured officials in charge throw in all the same. The authorities and civilians at Lyons seem to regard these prisoners without bitterness or hatred; partly, no doubt, because Lyons, thoroughly French in fact and feeling, is, all the same, a great way from the front and the scene of German atrocities in Belgium and the North.

The prison cell of a German colonel at Fort de Barraux, near Grenoble.

I have not seen the German prisoners at Marseilles, but a friend of mine, just back from that port, describes them to me as thoroughly lazy workmen, and when he commented on their laziness to a French officer in charge of some of their work, the officer said: "We do not know how to abuse them badly enough to get real work out of them. We treat them as human beings." One illustration of this treatment is the fact that a quarter of an hour's rest is allowed after luncheon. At that hour the ground is covered with reclining figures smoking or comfortably conversing. At the remark, made in English, that these German prisoners were as fat as prize pigs, one of the pigs turned angrily and glared at the speaker from the ground, and held up a copy of an English novel that he had been reading. French consideration toward German prisoners of war is to be found in the circumstance that at Marseilles full facilities for washing up before eating are provided for the prisoners, whereas no such provision is made for the Catalans (the laborers of the Joffre country), who have not the advantage of being prisoners of war.

When it comes to casting up the moral score between France and Germany this matter of the war prisoners will play its part. There has been no effort on France's side to even up the account of starving or abusing her prisoners as, alas, there remains small doubt that French prisoners in Germany are starved and abused. There is no such scourge of tuberculosis among German prisoners in France as is ravaging the unfortunate Frenchmen who are now in the power of Wilhelm II. There has been no attempt at reprisals against individuals who, however unlovely they may be, are not responsible for what their government is doing at home. There is not even the determined effort to break down their spirit which Germany systematically undertakes in her own prison camps by not merely starving and overworking the prisoners, but also disseminating false war news. Envoys of the Swiss Red Cross have been given full opportunities to visit the French prison camps, both in France and Morocco; Germany has denied the Swiss Red Cross access to her prison camps "for military reasons." In her treatment of German prisoners, as in most other respects, France is once more proving herself a civilized nation, and that will, in the long run, be worth more to her than tons of well paid German propaganda in America has been worth to Germany. Our country is slow to appreciate facts about foreign nations, for, after all, our minds approach foreign affairs without facility and without experience, but we are not entirely unintelligent after all. The French and the German policies in the matter of prisoners and their treatment are as far apart as the French and German theories of citizenship, or of national honor.

Very few complaints have been made at any of the German prison camps in France—none at all, so far as I can discover, at Lyons. Seldom, too, have private soldiers tried to escape their prison, though officers have in more than one case escaped or tried to escape, as when in August, 1916, four officers escaped from Toulouse and eight from Montpellier, all of them being subsequently recaptured either by the police or by some farmer's dog or by their own surrender after their legs gave out. It is some time now since three German privates made their escape from the camp at Pau, in the Pyrenees.

This case did not come under my own observation, but a professor at one of our state universities in the West is my authority for what follows. His word, if you know the man, is as good as some one else's sacred oath.

It happened last winter, and it was some hours before the escape of the three was discovered at all. For two days parties searched for them in the mountains; at the end of the second day the fugitives threw up their hands; cold, hungry, their clothes in rags, their feet a jelly. Trembling at the fate they now faced, they were led before the French commandant.

"I do not blame you for what you have done, for if I were a French prisoner in a German prison camp I should try to do exactly the same," remarked the Frenchman, eyeing his shivering enemies. "No, I can't get very excited about your crime, but all the same war is war and discipline is discipline. You will sleep in a dungeon to-night, and in the morning you will be sent—to Corsica."

Not a hard fate, certainly, since Corsica is in winter time a rather better address than the mountains. But Corsica is also an island, and from an island escape is a stiffer job.

Next morning the three prisoners were taken out of their cell, surrounded by French soldiers, marching with fixed bayonets. The entire prison camp turned out—the courtyard lined with French soldiers. The other prisoners, uninformed as to the sentence of the commandant upon their three venturesome comrades, had no doubt at all that they would be lined up and shot. How did they greet them? In silent commiseration?

Hardly. They reviled them in their vilest gutter language. To ingratiate themselves with their camp commander, they cursed their fellow-countrymen as dirty pig-dogs. They seized the hand of the French commandant, kissed it and said that the three who had tried to escape across the Spanish line were not good German soldiers and deserved their fate.

"It turns my stomach!" said the French commandant to my friend, the college professor from America. "I should rather be on the firing-line than have my hands kissed by these whining, poor-spirited animals!"

It is not always so ugly a picture. Let us turn the medal. The fact remains that most German prisoners (officers excepted) are so loath to attempt to escape from their very supportable exile that actual abuses have sprung up and inadequate precautions taken. In the harvest season a lady of Paris whom I know, spending a holiday in Auvergne, met on a country road a group of German war prisoners returning to their camp from their day's work in the fields. They were accompanied by a French sentinel, a private of some reserve regiment. This private was, unfortunately, very drunk. It took two German prisoners, one on each side, to keep him on his legs and moving in the right direction. A third prisoner tenderly carried his loaded rifle, bayonet and all.

An incident like this is not altogether becoming. It is not illustrative of proper discipline on the part of every soldier of the French army, but the French army has given proof enough of devotion for us to forgive it the indiscretion of this private in a reserve regiment of infantry, far from the front.

Besides, he knew his men. He knew those German prisoners were very happy where they were.

Each German prisoner at Barcelonette, in Alsace, has his morning shower.

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THE PLATEAU OF AMANCE

By MAURICE BARRÈS

Translated by William L. McPherson

The article which follows illuminates one of the decisive phases of the war on the Western Front. It celebrates the heroism and extraordinary tenacity of the French armies of Lorraine and the Vosges which, though defeated in the early part of August, rallied with almost superhuman effort and held off the German attack on Nancy.

M. Maurice Barrès is essentially a man of letters, not a military critic. Yet his portrayal of the spirit which saved the eastern border of France and thus enabled General Joffre both to win the Battle of the Marne and to reap the fruits of that victory helps to make the operations about Nancy even more understandable to the average reader than any technical military criticism would.

Once more on the heights of the Grand Couronné of Nancy we are going to breathe what the mystic poet, the Spaniard Jean de la Croix, calls, in his striking phrase, "the air of the battlements."

Yesterday from the hill of Mousson we saw the battles of the Moselle. To-day the hill of Amance is the best point from which we can view all the central field of the operations which saved Nancy.

Mousson, Amance—it is the theatre of the ancient struggles between the Roman Empire and the barbarians. The legions camped there for centuries. Attila installed himself with his hordes at Mousson. His lines, more than forty leagues in length, they say, were protected by walls of stone, while the legions sheltered themselves in ditches and behind earthworks which they threw up.

A Sombre Country

From Nancy we take the route of Château-Salins, the route which leads to the country of the Lorraine ponds, to the country of Dieuze, of Fenestrange, of Morhange, which has always been charged with sombreness and sadness. Then all at once in the vast plain of cultivated fields and forests we behold the long ridge to which clings the poor village of Amance.

What a flutter of emotion to see it again after its tragedy! I have neither military experience nor strategical competence; but I have my souvenirs of this region, for whose villages I have been Deputy and where I have often come to search for archæological remains. These walls which have passed through agonies, this soil steeped with blood, this glory forever written in the sky above overwhelm me. I excuse myself for expressing my feeling in terms so hasty. But a friend, to whom it is permitted to revisit, among the first, these sites, now sacred, believes himself privileged, even finds himself constrained, to pay them his immediate tribute.

Amance's Ancient Splendor

We enter the "Lower Gate." That is only a form of words. There is no longer a gate. The walls of the tiny city and its castle, whose towers dominate the plain, felt long ago the demolishing effect of the law of Richelieu. But the names remain. In climbing the steep street of the little city, completely destroyed by the bombardment, I note on a poor façade a single seignorial escutcheon, the survivor of an ancient splendor, nobly mutilated by a fresh wound. That scar, thus redoubled and revivified, is superb. We part by the "Upper Gate." Now we are in the cultivated lands on the plateau of the hill.

Before the war I had sought here the place called "The Vineyard of the Dukes," which perpetuates the memory of the sovereigns of Lorraine. But all of those archæological curiosities, very proper and attractive yesterday, seem to-day cheap bric-à-brac. We have eyes only for the prodigious damage accomplished here by the Prussian bullets.

Back from the Seille

But first let us raise our eyes. Let us look down there towards Dieuze and Sarrebourg. Our troops being there in mid-August, it is not my object to-day to tell of their successes and their reverses. It became necessary for them to retire.

On August 20 at midnight the 29th Division, called the Steel Division, and which forms with the 11th Division (the Iron Division) the glorious 20th Corps of Lorraine, quit the line of the Seille. History will tell with what calmness, under a frightful fire, it conducted its retreat. I have under my eyes notes in which an inhabitant of Vic, an eye witness, declares: "It was admirable! The troops marched as if they were on manœuvre work."

One incident has been reported to me which closes worthily the great, tragic days of the 19th, 20th and 21st. At 11 o'clock at night the colonel of the 160th, a veteran hardened by thirty years of campaigning, approached the general of brigade. His regiment had stopped, for a halt of an hour, along the road. The two chiefs talked about the dispositions to be taken. Then the general said: "We are going to move on."

The colonel shook his gray head.

"Impossible! They are asleep!"

Sleeping Heroes

It was true. Halted for some instants, those brave men, who had without a break fought and marched all the night of the 19th, all the day of the 20th, all the night of the 20th and all the day of the 21st—whom the enemy could not overcome—suddenly fall in a heap. They sleep the sleep of heroes, which nothing can interrupt.

An attentive group watches them sleeping: officers, colonel and general. The general collects some non-commissioned officers and thoughtfully arranges them along the ditches by the road, so that the artillery, which is going to pass, will not crush those sublime sleepers. Then, in order, the cannons and the rest of the column continue their march, defiling before the sleeping 160th as if to render them homage.

Nancy at the Mercy of the Foe

The Germans, in the midst of their success, were hardly less exhausted. If we are to believe what military men, witnesses of those days, have told me, from August 20 at 8 p. m. until the morning of the 21st Nancy was unprotected and at the mercy of the invaders. But one needs some repose even after a victory. The Germans did not attack until the 23d. Their attack was checked on the 24th, on the solid defences organized in advance by our troops. On the 25th all Castelnau and all Dubail—that is to say, the Grand Couronné and the Vosges—audaciously retook the offensive.

It is from Amance that one can follow best not the lines but the undulation of that mêlée of three weeks. Those battalions which move forward and backward, now pursuing, now pursued; that oscillation of victory which lasted three weeks—from the 23d of August to the 12th of September—our men, under the pressure of a superior enemy, clinging to the woods, to the farms, to the angle of a wall, to a bush, to the ruts in the road, to the little depressions in a field, attacking and re-attacking, assured that they would be conquered only when they no longer wished to conquer.

The German Bombardment

On the 26th we throw ourselves on Champenoux and are obliged to recoil. On the 27th and 29th we take the offensive again, and once more on September 1. At that moment the enemy arrives in force. Preparation is made for a formidable action. In the night of the 4th to the 5th of September the German heavy artillery, posted beyond our range on the borders of the Seille, opened fire with a force and prodigality which were terrifying. Our artillerymen could not leave their shelters. It was a rain of death. Our batteries had to remain silent. On the 4th, 5th and 6th of September the Germans threw 20,000 to 30,000 shells on the plateau of Amance. On the evening of the 6th they marched to the assault. But they could not dislodge us from the wood down there, which a little prairie separates from the ridge.

For the rest, we suffered checks at numerous points in the vast plain. Castelnau ordered that we repair those losses at any cost, and especially that we retake at any price, on the day of the 7th, the points whose abandonment would compromise Nancy.

A regiment of reinforcements, the 206th, arrived, while our artillery, to prepare the way, bombarded the forest of Champenoux.

The Fight for Champenoux

Let us now, readers, quit the plateau, since Amance is out of danger. Let us go into the forest of Champenoux. I have seen there the trenches from which the Germans repulsed, on the day of the 7th, the assault of our reinforcements. Our movement of recoil uncovered other positions, which our troops had to evacuate.

"Renew the fight; hang on, even unto death!" ordered our leaders. "The victory is to him who knows how to suffer a quarter of an hour longer than the other."

Revivified by some reinforcements, those heroic remnants, officers at the head, threw themselves with desperate violence on the village and forest of Champenoux. All the 8th they fought. Our men were worn out, haggard, sustained only by their souls. They had no longer time to eat. And what was there to eat?

An officer told Emile Heuriot that sometimes in the vast spaces ravaged by that hurricane of three weeks one met troops which marched at hazard, not knowing whither they were going and turning their backs on the battle. One faced them about and sent them at the enemy, and they went without a word, without a murmur, with a sort of drunken fury. What mattered it to them? They no longer hoped to survive. They exposed themselves like immortals. And, nevertheless, on the 8th also, our heroes failed.

William II at Eply

The day of the 9th was calm as death. The Germans also were taking breath. They didn't understand the miracle. They waited, in accordance with all the probabilities, for the French to retire. On the heights of Eply William, field glasses in hand, in a manner borrowed from Napoleon, took observations. Nobody saw him there. Yet all the world will see him there hereafter. Legend will not doubt that at that hour he believed in the retreat of the French and in his triumphal entry in cavalcade into the Place Stanislas and the Place Carrière (in Nancy).

Oh, well! Let him look more closely; let him wipe the lenses of his field glasses! He will see the French, half dead with fatigue, digging in feverish haste trenches on the positions to which they have been repulsed.

The two armies lost all their blood. Which of the two would succumb first? Castelnau had no longer any reserves. He said, "I shall hold on for two days. It will be two days more for France."

One thinks of the verse which follows the "Qu'il mourût" of Corneille, of which our school manuals say that it weakens the thought and was only written for the sake of the rhyme. You recall the sublime text:

"Que voulez-vous qu'il fît contre trois?
Qu'il mourût?
Ou qu'un beau désespoir alors le secourût?
Rome eût été du moins un peu plus tard
sujette."

Castelnau, Foch, Balfurier and the others, whose souls accorded with the soul of Corneille, wished that Nancy should be "plus tard sujette." Two days more, they said.

The Last Insult

That night of the 9th to the 10th of September, about 11 o'clock, in the midst of a storm, thunder, lightning and torrents of rain, shells fell on Nancy. What! The enemy was going to take such a step! The people of Nancy believed themselves lost.

They were saved. The German army had already begun its retreat.

Military witnesses have told me just what happened. The captain who received the order to advance before the German lines as far as he could, and who succeeded in pushing a big cannon as far as Remerville, executed his task. He sent into Nancy fifty shells, then turned on his tracks and, without halting, joined the retreat which had already commenced.

Thus Germany, knowing that she had failed, sought to destroy, to deface, to do violence to the beautiful city which had escaped her. There is nothing more natural in her baseness than this desire repulsed satisfying itself in insults.

Was it this night that the German Emperor with his bridegroom's cortége and his white cuirassiers, their uniforms soiled by the storm, left the heights of Eply? At this hour all the great combats of the war are still enigmas for us. The operations are not yet clear, the strategy is not yet justified.

What is certain is that the enemy, if he retired, if he relaxed his pressure, was still capable of striking terrible blows. On the 10th, Toul having been able to send us some reinforcements, we try to extend our lines. We attack, but our attack is once more repulsed. We renew it. On the 11th we get as far as the middle of the forest of Brin. The forces which came from Toul are massacred. The 149th replaces them and once again throws itself on La Bête. It recoils across the underwood. It leaves the forest, repasses the Seille and installs itself a few hundred metres back in the lines where I saw it last week.

Nancy was delivered. That was on the 12th of September. Joffre saved Nancy. But the Army of Lorraine, by its tenacity, had rendered possible the long operations of the Marne. These saviors of Joffre and of France had fought without any other preoccupation than to do each one his duty, in absolute ignorance of what was going on elsewhere.

"I can tell you nothing on the subject of the bombardment of Nancy," an officer of the 20th Corps wrote me. "I was some kilometres from the German batteries, and I knew of the bombardment only several days later. They kept us informed of nothing but what was happening on our right and on our left. And of the success of the Allied armies on the Marne we hadn't the least idea until the evening of September 12."

A Sanctuary of Patriotism

I complete my day by strolling sociably with our soldiers in the forest of Champenoux, a little damaged by the war, I admit, but more beautiful than I have ever seen it before; for now it is one of the sanctuaries of patriotism. Why should not we preserve forever those cabins, more glorious than palaces, constructed by these men, so simple, so ignorant of their own greatness, half warriors, half peasants, so terrible in battle, the first impression we receive of whom is one of extraordinary goodness and modesty?

Never a complaint! Before their virtue one remains stupid with admiration.

We skirt, while talking in little groups, the border of the pond of Brin, in the middle of the wood. I ask one of the soldiers.

"Do you fish sometimes?"

"The fish are worthless," he answers; "perhaps because of the corpses on which it is said they feed themselves now. But I believe that the corpses have been buried. If they were in there we should see them. In the water they rise."

The pond is peaceful; the vapors of the night arise. The Germans, on the other side of the prairies, do not budge. The cyclist arrives, bringing the newspapers. May he bring the next time the homage of our friendship and the gratitude of all to our comrades of Champenoux and of the Plateau of Amance!